

The Bliss Bestowing Hands of the True Individual

By Padmavajra

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01 On retreat - Ju Ching and the monks; 'The Four Ch'an Shouts'

Thank you very much Padmadaka. Thank you for a magnificent bonfire, Padmadaka and friends. I'm sure you're all fresh after so little sleep [Laughter]. I was thinking that we're really a bit namby-pamby compared with the great Ch'an masters. Dogen had a teacher named Ju-ching who, when they were doing intensive *sesshin*, would go out at 2:00 and ring the bell – you know the monks had all gone to sleep at midnight – and they'd all have to get into the shrine room, because he thought they needed extra meditation, and they'd been doing it all day. And he was bemoaning the fact that Zen practitioners weren't what they were compared to the old days [Laughter] because Zen masters like him were getting old and couldn't hit them as hard. And the last line of that passage is, "We must begin again to hit them harder." [Laughter] So, everybody be pleased to hear that we don't do that in our community. It's very gentle and nice.

So, as Padmadaka said, it's the last day, so really make the most of this day. It's rare to have the opportunity to be on retreat, so really make the most of it. It's a beautiful day, lots happening, and there'll be the usual daily program with a final puja tonight. Fairly simple. I just want to point out, though, at 10:00 I want the shrine room vacated because at ten there's going to be a special extra-curricular item, which you're invited to attend if you want to. This is the band – the Buddha band – The Four Ch'an Shouts. [Laughter] They want to make their musical offering to the retreat. Their musical realization of the Ch'an shouts. And you're invited to attend. There probably will be a point where you can join in with mantra chanting, but it's mainly their thing. But, that's at ten, so you're invited to that. If you want to come, come. If you don't want to come, that's fine too. So, it's an extra-curricular item. Good.

02 Chao Chu's Verses on the Great Awakening - broken-ness; Yuan Wu's commentary; little deaths and rebirths; the 8th Oxherding Picture - Bull and Man Both Forgotten

Okay, so we come to the final talk.

So, the day before yesterday, as Padmadaka told us, we heard about Chao Chu and the *koan* "No," "Mu," "Wu." And we heard how Hakuin employed it. Heard as well about practicing in the *alaya*, about the turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness, about the revolution in the basis. About the experience of what they call in Korean Sun Zen Buddhism, "brokenness." We heard about Great Death. Death of all notions of a fixed and separate selfhood. And one of my favorite verses in the *Blue Cliff Record*, one of my favorite Dharma verses, describes the effect of

this realization by Chao Chu himself. Verses describing a great awakening. It goes like this:

*The cock crows in the early morning
Sadly I see as I rise how worn out I am;
I haven't a gown or a shirt.
Just the semblance of a robe.
My loincloth has no seat, my trousers no opening –
On my head are three or five pecks of ash-gray hair.
Originally I intended to practice to help save others;
Who would have suspected that instead I would have become an idiot!*

Now, it might surprise you that a verse like this is an awakening verse. But, what I think Chao Chu is trying to describe is that state of brokenness. Don't take his sadness or his "idiot" in a conventional way. He's talking from the stripping back, the stripping away, of everything conditioned. He is talking from a profound spiritual poverty. A plain sense of things, a profound un-knowing. Knowing implies self and other. Attainment implies self and other. Chao Chu has a profound non-attainment. So, he's an idiot.

Lin-chi – Chao Chu comes from his line - says that he wanted his disciples to be like blind donkeys. A wonderful expression. A wonderful image of un-knowing, which is a real knowing, of course.

Chao Chu once described his great spiritual awakening, and in fact, his great spiritual death, with the words, "Suddenly I was ruined and houseless. Suddenly thrown into great emptiness."

It could sound bleak but Yuan Wu says in his commentary on the verse:

If one can truly reach this realm, whose eyes would not open? Though you go through upsets and spills, all places are this realm, all places are this time and season. The ten directions are without walls. And the four quarters are without gates.

What opens up then is a vast open space, boundless space. Then you're free to follow the fragrant grasses and pursue the falling flowers. We are now in the midst of winter. There is darkness and cold and utterly bare trees. It could be a bleak time, standing in the marshes amid the dung-colored reeds. There is such an openness, a plainness when everything is stripped away, when everything is plain, everything dying back.

A year or two ago somebody asked me in a question and answer session to tell of my (haha) spiritual experiences and insights. You know, my profound insights and meditation experiences. Which is always a bit of a laugh, isn't it? I thought about it and I thought, well, let's take it seriously, people want to know. The nearest I could get to it was those times when I was brought back to a plain sense of things. That was usually associated with times of humiliation, even shame, when I realised that I had been a complete fool, a complete idiot. And I don't mean an idiot in Chao Chu's sense. I mean an idiot in the sense that you and I understand. Times when I saw that

even after years of practice, I was still basically egotistical, basically self-centred, basically conceited, and that I had been unkind and insensitive to people. Seeing it plainly - without dressing it up, without finding excuses, without giving reasons, but just seeing it plainly – was deeply humiliating, deeply shameful. But always, those times, even though I didn't know it at the time, have always been entries into a new life, a new possibility. The little death before the little rebirth. And I think that's important. We talk about the Great Death as something cataclysmic and final, but actually, it's about having little deaths and little rebirths. That's what our life should be like - realizations of our meanness and that kind of thing before moving on.

Chao Chu's verse, of course, is right out there. It reminds me in fact of the 8th of the Zen Ox-herding or Bull-herding pictures. This is a delightful set of ten paintings and verses describing the Zen way, Zen practice. Originally these were Chinese, but it's used a lot in Zen teaching, and you could do a probably very good retreat on those ten ox-herding paintings and poems. So, it describes the Way in terms of finding and training a bull. The bull is the mind, us. So, it has this picture of a man – a herdsman - finding the bull and then taming it and bringing it home.

Picture eight is called “bull and man both forgotten,” and the picture for this is of a perfect circle. Just filling the white sheet. A perfect empty circle, round and full. And one of the verses that illustrates this goes:

*Space shattered at one blow and holy and worldly both vanished.
In the Untreadable, the path has come to an end.
The bright moon over the temple and the sound of wind in the tree.
All rivers, returning their waters, flow back again to the sea.*

03 Entering the Marketplace with Bliss Bestowing Hands

But that's not the end. You don't end with the Great Death. There are two more pictures to go in the bull-herding series, and I want to jump to the tenth, and last, which is called “Entering the Marketplace with Bliss Bestowing Hands.” Beautiful image. So, there's no bull in this picture. Instead there is a stout, grizzled man, balding, with a beard, with a big belly – well-developed and sticking out of his robes. He has a staff, and tied onto it is a full sack. There's lots of goodies, maybe, in that sack. He is walking under a tree and meeting a short young man who looks remarkably like the young herdsman in the earlier paintings.

And it's a really beautiful image, and actually, it's the image of the one who comes from the Great Death. It's the image of the seasoned, the mature, Ch'an traveller. His stoutness, his fatness, in East Asian tradition would symbolise immense spiritual wealth and richness - the wealth of awakening, the wealth of enlightenment. That great sack is all the riches of all the qualities of enlightenment. And he's showing his bare chest and stomach, which is not the decent thing to do. You wouldn't do that if you were regarded as being part of polite society, so this shows that he is not bothered with what people think about him. He is at ease. He is not imprisoned by formality. He doesn't care whether people like him or not. So, there is something rather homely and reassuring about him. At the same time, he seems to come from somewhere else – somewhere “other.” He's been around. He's been out there.

And the verses that describe him are rather lovely too:

*Bare-chested and bare-footed, he enters the market,
Face streaked with dust and head covered with ashes,
But a mighty laugh spreads from cheek to cheek.
Without troubling himself to work miracles, suddenly dead trees break into bloom.*

*In friendly fashion, this fellow comes from a foreign race,
With features like a horse or a donkey.
But on shaking his iron staff, all of a sudden
All gates and doors spring wide open for him.*

*With a great laugh spread over his face,
He talks Mongolian, he speaks Chinese.
He enters the market, swirling his staff, he returns home.
He frequents wine shops and fish stalls to make the drunkards open their eyes and
awaken to themselves.*

So, here we have the image of the true Bodhisattva. One who never leaves his home of emptiness, of awakening, but goes into the marketplace - comes into our world, comes to us, who are drunk and fishy. He comes naturally to awaken us and he does nothing miraculous. Doesn't have to try. But dead trees bloom. He is just naturally in touch with what is deepest, and so he can tune in to any one of us. He speaks Mongolian, he speaks Chinese, he speaks German, he speaks Spanish, he speaks French, English, Hindi, Kashmiri, Telegu - he speaks our language. He can even wear our clothes. He can tune in naturally to our time and our place, to our concern and our aspiration – happily, easily, un-self-consciously. He goes in the marketplace with Bliss Bestowing Hands. That beautiful image.

This is where we should aim our practice, to become this man in the marketplace with bliss bestowing hands. Coming to people with natural generosity, with natural loving-kindness, natural friendliness and wisdom, that flows naturally from that full, empty space of realization.

04 The Bliss Bestowing Hands in the world; Master Yang Ki exhaling into darkness; environments for practice

So, I want, for the rest of the talk really, to look at some of the actions of Zen Masters. We've seen how some of them get on. I want to see how they behaved in their maturity, to get a sense of what it might be like to go into the marketplace with bliss bestowing hands. So this shouldn't be too challenging, this talk. I gather some of them might have been. You can just sit back and enjoy.

Many Cha'an and Zen monks, after years spent practicing in monasteries and studying with great masters - although usually there was only one master that they mainly followed, so they really put the bucket down, deeply, into the well – many of them, after their awakening, eventually established monasteries of their own or took over old monasteries in order to communicate their experience to others. In a way

there's not a lot to say about this. In a way there's a lot to say, but it's not particularly interesting in a way. The daily routine of the monastery, the daily routine of practice – I mean there's not a lot to say about the washing up, is there? And, you know, serving meals, and the day-to-day of practice that we've been doing this last week. There's not a lot to say.

But what I find interesting about this is the bliss bestowing hands created and maintained practice institutions, environments of practice. Places where you could meditate, study and live with companions in the Dharma, and work for the Dharma, and serve the local community. Monasteries in the ancient Buddhist world were important focal points for the villages around, for the whole country. The bliss bestowing hands just set that up and made sure it kept happening, and I think this is very important. In a way, it's not very exciting, but absolutely necessary. Just the work of setting up places.

You know, we sit here in this fantastic shrine room in this incredible place – well this has come from the work of many, many people. Many, many bliss bestowing hands have made this possible. And when I think back to some of the retreat venues that I've had to go to, you know, in India and other places, and the amount of effort that went into just trying to have a retreat in very difficult circumstances, you really appreciate what you've got in a place like this. Sometimes people say they want adventure, they want to take initiative, and make things happen. And that's very exciting and it does really build your character if you take something on, but check this out.

There's master Yang Ki, who became abbot of Mount Yang Ki, and when he took it over the monastery buildings were old and decayed. They were barely able to keep out wind and rain. And when snow and hail fell, it just pelted the monks seated on the meditation platforms. Maybe they were like this, and imagine this doesn't have a proper roof and snow and rain and hail is pelting down on you. And of course, the monks volunteered sincerely to do the place up, to make it better, and Master Yang Ki said no. He said:

The Buddha says our lifespan is uncertain. It's always decreasing, and the highlands and valleys are always changing. In the past the great sages sat under trees to meditate. All of you have only just left home – you're still youngsters in your forties and fifties.

[Laughter]

How can you waste your time in leisure in comfortable buildings?"

And the next day he gave them a poem:

*When I began living in this building with crumbling walls,
All the meditation platforms were covered by jewels of snow.
Scrunching up my shoulders to my neck,
I exhaled into darkness,
Reflecting on the ancient Buddha, abiding under a tree.*

So that might be a bit much for us, but there's an example of going into the marketplace with bliss bestowing hands. But we need good places with roofs. Places

to practice in, to study in, to reflect on the Dharma, to come together in. To come together with other and to work with others. One of the things Sagharakshita, our teacher, has placed great stress on over the years is the importance of our centers and our retreat centers and our right livelihood businesses and all the different things that we have. And some people have felt that he's placed too much stress on that. But I must say I disagree, because without supportive conditions, good physical conditions, spiritual practice is actually very, very difficult. And we shouldn't underestimate it. If we lost all our centers and communities and businesses overnight, it wouldn't be the end of the world. I mean we've still got a vibrant spiritual community. But, I think some people would have a very hard time. Especially the people that don't appreciate these things, they'd have a very, very hard time.

So, we need to reflect on this. Bliss bestowing hands don't just touch and then leave you with a nice, groovy feeling. Bliss bestowing hands make dead trees bloom. They make you bloom, they make places where you can bloom, they create a world in which you can practice and work together. And it takes real work to do this, real steady work, real rolling-up-your-sleeves kind of work - completely unglamorous kind of work. You know, I think of dear old Osadha, behind his desk doing the books. Totally unglamorous, totally unsung, nobody comes and says, "What a fantastic set of figures!" But if he didn't do it, we'd be in a right old state.

05 Lin Chi on 'environment'; Hakuin and the Samurai - hell and heaven; with Sanghasen in India

And then, how do the masters communicate? Well, it seems that they are highly attuned to others – there's this deep natural empathy. The communication, the rapport, isn't just about words, it's about tuning into and meeting the environment that someone walks in, lives in, inhabits. We all carry an environment with us. We all carry a history with us, a whole host of concerns and of interests and aspirations. We are all environments. We're all worlds. The master meets that. He naturally attunes to that. He speaks their language, literally and metaphorically.

The great Lin Chi says – from a sublime context of great spiritual practice:

A man of the way, who has learned to lean on nothing, is a master of the environment. If a man comes to me and says, "I'm looking for the Buddha," I respond to him at once by meeting him with a clean and pure environment. If a man asks me about bodhisattvas, I respond at once by meeting him with an environment of compassion. If a man asks me about enlightenment, I respond at once by meeting him with an environment of wonderful purity. If a man asks about Nirvana, I respond at once with an environment of stillness and tranquillity. The environment takes ten thousand different shapes. In response to the environment, the master manifests different forms, like the moon reflected in different bodies of water.

So, Lin Chi meets environment with environment, world with world, because he leans on nothing. He dwells in that round, full, empty space so he can tune into whatever he meets. Sometimes meeting the environment means creating an environment where someone sees themselves more clearly. The Zen masters do this spontaneously, it's natural.

There's a lovely story of Hakuin and the Samurai. Hakuin was very good with Samurai, he loved to wind them up and really have a go at their pretensions – very earthy, Hakuin. One day, a haughty Samurai came to Hakuin with a question, “What is Heaven? What is hell?” So Hakuin said, “Well, why do you ask? What's the matter? Are you frightened of hell? A snivelling coward like you isn't worth teaching.” Really talked down to him. And the Samurai – because insult's a deadly thing to them – is incensed. Such insults to a Samurai! And he drew his sharp sword and chased Hakuin into the main hall of the monastery. And you've got the Samurai hacking at Hakuin, Hakuin dodging into the shadows and hiding behind pillars, and the Samurai's really striking out. And then Hakuin shouted out, “This anger is your hell!” And the Samurai just stopped short and immediately calmed down and apologised, and asked for forgiveness. And Hakuin said, “And that's Heaven.”

So, Hakuin spontaneously created the necessary environment to show someone themselves to wake them up. Don't worry, I'm not going to try anything like that – I know my limitations. And I don't suggest you try that at home yourselves. [Laughter] Sometimes meeting the environment happens in a few words and the other person sort of refuses the exchange and they get completely baffled. You baffle someone and they're thrown, and they maybe don't meet it.

I remember being on retreat – not with a Zen master, but with an Order member in India, named Sanghasen. He was in his seventies. Sanghasen means “army of the sangha.” Incredible character. In his early days he was a trades union leader. He was the leader of the beedi rollers, the little country cigarettes. And he had had a very rough and tough life but he connected with the Dharma powerfully when he came on retreat. His family were all married and nicely settled so he became a kind of wanderer. He'd just wander from village to village teaching the Dharma. That's all he lived for. And he'd come home occasionally to see his wife who was very happy. But, this is the way he lived, and he loved to come on retreats with me, he really loved it. And we used to just fool around, he was just a gorgeous, lovely man. And I'd look at him sometimes, and he really looked like a lion, this man. Like an old lion, or a seasoned bull. A really fantastic man. I'm not saying he is enlightened, but just wonderful. Wonderfully direct as well.

And we were on one retreat, a retreat for people who certainly regarded themselves as being serious about the Dharma, and there was one young lad - in his late twenties, just married, and very keen to be ordained. Sanghasen said to him, “Are you a goat or are you a bull?” And this completely threw the young lad, and he said, “Well, what do you mean.” He said, “Well, a goat stays around the house. (You see this in India) A bull is out in the field, not around the home.” And the young said, “Oh, well, then I'm a bull. I'm a bull.” Sanghasen said, “Are you a young bull or are you a seasoned bull?” He said, “What do you mean?” He wanted to know the right answer to give. Sanghasen said, “Well, the young bull just chases the cows. That's all he does. A seasoned bull works.” The lad said, “Oh, I'm a seasoned bull.” Sanghasen saw right through this guy, because sadly he just gave it all up, gave up the Dharma a few years later. He failed the test, he didn't take up the test.

So, it's like that sometimes. The environment that is created kind of bamboozles you. Are you going to meet it? Are you going to meet the environment? Lin Chi also says

that he will take away someone's environment. He'll take it away. Throw them right back on themselves. There's a period in my life - early days of when I was ordained - where I wanted a lot of attention from Sangharakshita. I was always sort of hanging around him trying to get attention and making sort of really bright Dharma comments, and showing how brilliant I was. I mean, I was a youngster. And his way of dealing with it was to completely ignore me. You know, I'd go up to say hello, "Hello, Bhante!" and he'd just sort of turn like that or move through a room like you weren't there. It was extremely painful. It was like I was floundering in space. But I'm really glad it happened. I learnt something. Later we talked about it, actually talked about it. He was telling me to grow up, basically. Quite simple. Again, I wouldn't try that myself, and I wouldn't recommend it, but it certainly worked for me.

06 Combat and challenge - realising the Truth for yourself; Kyogen and Isan - where do you go after death?

Masters, it also must be said, like to be met, they like to be challenged. They like to be tested. They don't want sheep or goats. They like some combat, some swordplay. They want you to meet them with total authenticity, and they want you to realize the truth for yourself.

There's another interesting thing about Sangharakshita, I remember once making a quite serious decision about my spiritual life and I wrote to him asking for advice. He clarified a few things and at the end said, "In the end it's your decision and I am confident about any decisions you might make about your life." So, a very powerful thing for your teacher to say to you. He knew what he was saying. He was saying, "It's your life."

There's a very touching and moving story about a Tang Chinese Master. I'm going to use the Japanese pronunciation of his name because I can't pronounce the Chinese. Probably can't say the Japanese either. I'm very conscious of Ruben, who's been in Japan, and my Japanese pronunciation he's probably wincing at out there. But anyway.

There's the story of Kyogen, and Kyogen was a particularly gifted young monk. He joined the monastery in his teens and unfortunately his teacher, his master, the head of the monastery, died after only a couple of years of his training. The monastery was taken over by the monk, Isan. And Isan knew Kyogen well, and this Zen school was noted for the strong bonds, the warm affectionate bonds, between master and disciple, master and pupil. And Isan knew how brilliant Kyogen was, but also knew how far he had to go. Kyogen knew the scriptures very well, in fact he knew them off by heart, but he had a lot of spiritual work to do. And Kyogen was rather dazzled by his own brilliance. And Kyogen had to go to Isan to ask to train under him now. He had to formally ask him to take over his training. And Isan asked, "Are you sure you wish to continue? After all, you do know the scriptures by heart now." And Kyogen was very pleased that he'd been recognized, and said, "Well, yes, maybe another year or two here would help me."

And Isan said, "You conceited little idiot. Do you think that all the scriptures in the world will make you understand the real mystery? Where do you go after death? Do

you know? Tell me!” Well, Kyogen had to find out, so he went through all the scriptures in his head and he couldn’t find the answer. He searched through volumes, found other volumes, read, re-read – no answer. And it became his koan. *Where do I go after I’m dead?* Couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, and he was convinced he’d find the answer in them. *Where do I go after death?* And in a state of terrible doubt and confusion, he rushed back to Isan and said, “Please! You tell me! Where do I go after death? I can’t bear it!” He’s really worked up, out of his head. And Master Isan said, “It cannot be told. Nor would I rob you of finding out for yourself.” At this, Kyogen was completely out of it – completely lost it. He just got furious. Blind fury took hold of him. He grabbed hold of his teacher, Isan, and said, “You must tell me!! I can’t go on otherwise! Tell me or I kill you!” I mean, you really can get worked up like that when you practice, “Tell, or I kill you!” And he meant it, he really would kill Isan. Isan, utterly fearless, just roared with laughter and said, “And do you think that my dead body will tell you?”

And Kyogen just went flat. And then he realized what he’d done, he’d threatened his teacher, his master. He’d got violent with his teacher. He felt terribly ashamed. So ashamed that he felt he’d just broken the link with his master and with the teachings. He felt that he just had to leave, just had to go, and lead a very humble life. He took off his robes, just wore ordinary gear, and just wandered the countryside and decided, “Well, I’ll just live harmlessly and humbly. I’ll just become a wanderer, just going place to place.”

So, he did this, with all his conceit really hammered. And eventually he found his way to the tomb of Hui-Neng, the great Sixth Patriarch. And somehow the grave, the tomb, was neglected and run down. So he just spent his time very humbly, just sweeping away the leaves, weeding the paths, tending the gardens, taking stones and flints from the ground. Just very simply, year after year, just leading a very simple, useful, harmless life. Just getting on with his practice and working. This went on for about ten years. And then one day, he’d swept the yard as usual, he’d collected the leaves in a basket and the odd stray pebble. And, as usual, he emptied all this stuff into a bamboo thicket near the tomb. And one of the pebbles just clicked against a bamboo. Just as usual, the usual sound. And that click just went right to his heart. And then he just knew. He just saw. He knew where he would go after death. He had a Great Awakening.

So, he put away his tools, he bathed, and for the first time since he’d left Isan, he put on his monk’s robes. He went up a little hill and stood looking in the direction of Isan’s monastery, and prostrated fully nine times, in profound gratitude to the teacher who, even at the peril of his life, did not rob him of his own realization.

Very touching, beautiful story. So the masters want you to realize for yourself. The bliss-bestowing hands throw you back on yourself.

07 Hakuin and Satsu; Hakuin's self-portrait

And they don’t mind learning from you too. Their bliss-bestowing hands can receive, and not just from monks – from anyone.

There are some lovely stories about old Hakuin. Hakuin, in his later years of course, was a real old seasoned bull, a real old tiger. And he didn't mind learning from all the young steers and little cubs. And one of Hakuin's first disciples, in fact, was a 15-year-old girl named Satsu. And Satsu was having trouble getting a suitable husband. Apparently, she was a bit plain. So her parents suggested that she pray to Kannon, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. One day, her father came home and saw her sitting on the Kannon Sutra, the Avalokiteshvara Sutra. Just sitting on the book. Absolutely, terribly shocking in Buddhist culture - you never put a scripture on the floor. To sit on it is appalling sacrilege, and her father was horrified. He said, "What are you doing sitting on a holy book? It's terrible!" And she said, "Well, what's the matter? That Hakuin says everything has Buddha-nature. So, how can there be a difference between my rear end and a holy book? What's the difference between my bum and a holy book if it's all Buddha-nature?" [Laughter] And her father was out of his mind and he went to Hakuin, who smiled at the story, and he said, "Your daughter's sharp!" He was quite pleased. He said, "Give her this *koan* to meditate on, from me. Tell her this:

In the night's darkness, if you can hear the voice of the crow that does not cry, the unborn future will be clear, and you can understand your father's love."

So, father went home, told the *koan* to his daughter and Satsu just wasn't impressed. She said, "What's so clever about that? What's so clever about him? Hakuin isn't as clever as me, you know. The old fool." So, she was a real handful. And one day she went to Hakuin to ask him to elucidate a difficult point, and as soon as Hakuin began to speak and explain – and if you can imagine, she went in and she asked, "Venerable Master, please give me this teaching." – and Hakuin was about to speak, and she just said, "Thank you!" and just left. [Laughter] And Hakuin was completely astonished! He didn't mind in the slightest. She was a girl with real spirit, who really wanted to practice, and she was a staunch disciple of Hakuin. And eventually she did get married and all the rest of it, and was a Great Zen Granny, in the end. [Laughter] Imagine that! A Zen Granny, whew! That's even more frightening...

But, Hakuin's later life is full of stories like this - encounters with all kinds of people. And what's impressive is his natural dignity, his openness to whomever he meets. Completely open, a wonderful human quality to it all.

Hakuin was also a poet, and especially a great calligrapher. Did some very large paintings of Bodhidharma and calligraphies of various sayings, and beautiful self-portraits – some where he looks very fierce. But there's one I particularly like. It's been sort of coming up in meditation as a real inspiration for sittings. It's his face and the top of his body, and you can see his hands in meditation. And it's very simple, kind of cartoon-like. But there's a real feeling of meditation, of absorption. But it's light and playful. He looks like an old man, but like a child as well. A beautiful, simplicity, and it's given me quite a different feel about what goes on in meditation. Very intimate painting. This is even in just a small reproduction, not the originals. Fantastic. So, this is creative activity in the masters. They get close to, they become intimate with life, they're intimate with themselves. And it can, in some cases, turn into art and poetry – great art and great poetry.

08 Ryokan's poems

Perhaps this is most vividly expressed in the life of Ryokan, the great Japanese poet. Hugely popular poet I think even now in Japan. But also a great Zen master. He lived in the late 18th and early 19th century. He was a wanderer, a hermit, a poet, a Zen master. And in his poetry, there is a beautiful blend of the human, the ordinary, the profound, the sublime, the playful, the simple. He loved to play games with the village children who would often tease him. He would go and talk to a local farmer down the mountain and get wonderfully drunk on *saki* with him. At the end of his life there's this very touching platonic love affair he has with a nun. Very touching relationship they share. They wrote poetry for each other. And running through it all, there's this sense of space, of emptiness, of purity, impermanence, celebration, and it's ordinary. I'm going to read you a few poems that I've picked out from the translations by Burton Watson, which are very, very good indeed:

*The rain has stopped, the clouds have drifted away
and the weather is clear again.
If your heart is pure, then all things in your world are pure.
Abandon this fleeting world, abandon yourself,
Then the moon and flowers will guide you along the way.*

*Fresh morning snow in front of the shrine.
The trees! Are they white with peach blossoms
Or white with snow?
The children and I joyfully throw snowballs.*

*I sit quietly, listening to the falling leaves -
A lonely hut, a life of renunciation.
The past has faded, things are no longer remembered.
My sleeve is wet with tears.*

*A thousand peaks, covered with frozen snow.
Ten thousand mountain paths, yet no sign of human beings.
Every day, only zazen;
Sometimes the sound of snow blowing against the window.*

*Since I came to this hermitage,
How many years have passed?
If I am tired I stretch out my feet;
If I feel fine I go for a stroll in the mountains.
The ridicule or praise of worldly people means nothing.
Following my destiny, for this body I have received from my parents
I have only thanks.*

*Walking along a narrow path at the foot of the mountain,
I come to an ancient cemetery filled with countless tombstones
And thousand-year-old oaks and pines.
The day is ending with a lonely, plaintive wind.
The names on the tombs are completely faded.
And even the relatives have forgotten who they were.*

*Choked with tears, unable to speak,
I take my staff and return home.*

*Zen master Ryokan!
Like a fool, like a dunce
Body and mind completely dropped off!*

And his famous haiku:

*The thief
left it behind
the moon at the window.*

So, there you have some Ryokan. Moving through the world with bliss-bestowing hands - a different kind of master. There's no one way of moving through the world. Some masters are very austere, very strict and dynamic like Lin Chi, like Chao Chu. Others, like Dogen, are very refined and very contemplative, live a contemplative monastic life. And then there's Hakuin – earthy, outspoken – his writings really laying into bad practice. And there's Ryokan, moving with the seasons, moving with the impermanence of the world, the floating world, playful, filled with emotion.

09 So many ways to connect; Hakuin's death; Dogen's final days - grandmotherly compassion; Dogen's death verse

Probably there are many more expressions of this. Throughout Buddhist tradition, in fact, there are many more expressions of this. Awakening, enlightenment, is expressed in so many ways. And this is a great source of inspiration for us. We all have our approaches. We all have our personalities, our interests, all unique. So it's good that there's such a range of examples. There are so many ways in, so many ways to connect. And of course, one day, we'll be going into the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands. What kind of man will we be? How will we, without trying, cause dead trees to burst into blossom?

Even the greatest enlightened man doesn't live forever. And it's interesting to see how our Zen masters approach death. The other day we heard of Yen Tu's shout as he was murdered by bandits. And it's not always like that. Actually, it's rarely so dramatic.

Hakuin was 84 when he died. He lived in semi-retirement the last years of his life and he had a mysterious illness - chills, fever, fatigue. In the winter of 1768, a doctor came to examine him, felt his pulses and everything seemed all right. After he went, Hakuin said, "Some doctor! He can't see that I'll be dead in three days." And then he painted his final piece of calligraphy, his life statement, really. The giant character *chu*, which means midst – in the sense of "in the midst of." With an inscription on either side: "

Meditation in the midst of action is a billion times superior to meditation in stillness.

At dawn on the 11th day of the 12th month, Hakuin awoke from a peaceful sleep. He let loose a great, “Katsu!” rolled over on one side and died. Practicing, teaching, communicating right to the end, in awareness to the end and beyond.

Dogen’s final years are very painful. Dogen died in his fifties after a long and very painful illness, and he devoted his life to establishing what he called a pure monastic community. And he had, by the time of his final days, many disciples, including those who he felt he could entrust the leadership of his community to. One of them was brilliant, was gifted, but Dogen was very concerned about him. He was concerned about his lack of what they call “grandmotherly compassion.”

This is a peculiar Zen term, very important in the tradition. It indicates a deep care and concern for those who are less experienced than yourself. Just like a grandmother with her grandchildren. But, of course, we know that grandmothers can also be very direct. She’s old, so she doesn’t care what the rest of the family think about her. She cares very, very deeply. You can be sure of that. But she’ll tell you straight if necessary.

I remember I had a Cornish grandmother who we called Granny Dingle, and she was extremely kind. But I remember one time I was having dinner with her and my very old grandfather and my mother, and my old grandfather – who was one hundred – he’d had no teeth. So Granny Dingle mashed up his food and would feed him. He looked like a baby, really, although he had his wits about him even then. And I got the giggles and Granny Dingle just turned on me, saying, “You should respect your grandfather!” And well, that was quite a teaching, I can tell you. But, this very nice, mild-mannered old lady...

So, this is a metaphor, this grandmotherly compassion, for the awakened man. This great love, this great care and concern, but no-nonsense. And the disciples can sense whether someone has it. They know. And if it isn’t there in the leader or elders of the community, it affects the whole community. They can’t, in a way, settle into their practice. And Dogen knew this brilliant disciple – brilliant in all kinds of ways, good at meditation, good at teaching, very good at running the monastery, very ambitious, very capable – but he lacked that grandmotherly compassion, that wasn’t there. That deep care and concern. Too concerned about himself still. You know, that deep, real, no-nonsense care and concern. And it’s quite sad, actually, that the Soto Zen tradition in Japan had all sorts of problems with the succession because of this – centering around this particular disciple.

There’s a great message here, as well, of course, that even the awakened man cannot make things perfect for us. No matter how well he sets things up, how well he teaches, we continue the tradition. It’s really down to us. He can’t make it all all right. And of course, we also go into death alone, like the Zen masters. We work with others, we work for others, we might have great spiritual friends, but we go into the market with bliss-bestowing hands and we go into death on our own. All this in the end is down to us. Our life is about what we do with it. Let me read you Dogen’s death verse, another example of how to go into death:

*Fifty-four years lighting up the sky.
A quivering leap smashes a billion worlds.*

Hah!
Entire body looks for nothing.
Living, I plunge into the Yellow Springs.

10 You are only alive right now; Lin Chi and the True Man of No Rank

So over these two weeks – some of you have only been here for a week, of course, but some of you have been here for the whole time, it seems like an eternity, I feel like I've been on this retreat forever in a way - we've been looking into the tiger's cave. We've been tangling eyebrows with Zen masters. I've been verbosely making up complications as Yuan Wu puts it. I've been babbling on like a madman. But I hope it's been useful. I hope it sparks you off. I hope it makes you look at yourself more deeply. I hope it makes you really want to make the most of your life. Remember that quotation from Dogen that I said right at the beginning of the retreat, "You are only alive, right now."

Human life is very precarious and very precious. It doesn't matter how intelligent we are, how talented we are, how wealthy we are. It doesn't matter whether we think we're brilliant or dull, whether we're popular or unpopular. None of that actually matters. All that matters is that we make something of ourselves. Make something of our mysterious living humanness, which when you look, is marvellous and inconceivable.

Somewhere there is a formless essential man. This is the way the great Tang master, Lin Chi, speaks. Lin Chi is hugely influential on the Zen tradition and inspired generations of followers. The Rinzai line. Hakuin was a Rinzi, Lin Chi practitioner – so he was a descendant of Lin Chi. And Lin Chi was extraordinarily direct, down-to-earth and very concrete. He knew the profound categories of the Buddha, Dharma, one mind, non-duality, etc. But he is known especially for speaking of the True Man of No Rank. He speaks of and speaks to the True Man of No Rank." In other words, he kind of makes abstruse language something we can relate to. Actually, it's originally a Taoist idea but Lin Chi's not being Taoist here, he's using that image.

In ancient China, every man was apparently assigned a rank, a status, a place in society. Everyone knew where they were. And of course, we do exactly the same. Might not have been assigned to us, but we do the same. We want to know where we stand in the pecking order. We make ourselves high or low, or good or bad. We are fixing, all the time, our relationships.

But, says Lin Chi, the true man of the Buddha way is the True Man of No Rank. Our formless, mysterious humanness which is a brilliant shining light. "Don't doubt this True Man of No Rank," Lin Chi says, "Don't doubt that mysterious humanness. Don't doubt your brilliant shining light. Doubt is the big problem. We don't make progress because we lack faith in ourselves, we lack faith in our brightness, we lack faith in our true man of no rank." He says the main problem for Zen practitioners is lack of faith in their True Man of No Rank. So he says:

Followers of the way, here in this body there is the True Man of No Rank. Constantly he comes and goes. Look, look! Followers of the way, the True Man of No Rank has

no marks. He doesn't come from anywhere and doesn't stay anywhere, yet he is brisk and lively. As for his many activities, they happen in no place. When you look for him, you cannot find him, for he is the Mystery. Followers of the way, there is only this True Man of No Rank listening to my teaching, unconditioned, dependent on nothing. It is he who gives birth to all the Buddhas. It is he who is the mother of all the Buddhas.

So, followers of the way, inspired by Lin Chi, inspired by all the Zen masters, let us make the most of our time here on this earth. Let us make the most of our time today. Let us make the most of our time all of our days. Let us bring forth our True Man of No Rank. Let us be a man of the Way. Let us give birth to Buddhas. Let us dwell in the Mystery of our true humanness and move in the world with bliss-bestowing hands.